

*Born to Set Thy People Free*  
*Advent 2: Hope for the World*

by  
The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, <sup>2</sup>during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup>He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, <sup>4</sup>as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. <sup>5</sup>Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; <sup>6</sup>and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

## Malachi 3:1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>2</sup>But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; <sup>3</sup>he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. <sup>4</sup>Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

The one and only gospel path toward Jesus goes through John the Baptist. All four gospels are clear about this: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John introduce Jesus by telling us about John. He's the Old Testament prophet who, by the grace of God, leapt into the New. He appears in each of the gospels as if encased in the classical Hebrew prophet mold: quoting scripture and drawing people out into the wilderness, shouting at them to repent, to turn away from their sinfulness and embrace God's ways before it's too late, as his long finger points to the coming of God over the desert horizon. This is the common message in each of the gospels as they characterize John.

However, Luke gives us a unique addition. Luke does not mention John's robe of camel hair or his leather belt around his waist or his odd diet of locusts and wild honey. Instead, while rushing toward the story of Jesus, Luke uses his economy of words to locate John in time, in place, in human history. John may be doing his usual thing in the desert, but Luke makes it clear that we know what's going on in the nearby urban centers of human civilization. Let's take a closer look at the list of names so that we do not miss understanding the high price of the real estate here, because this one verse introduces not only John, but the whole gospel of Jesus Christ and its importance is location, location, location.

*During the reign of Emperor Tiberius.* Tiberius was the ruler of the Roman Empire who was able to send his armies at a moment's notice to squash dissent. In Luke's time he was building a grand and beautiful palace city on the island of Capri, off the southern coast of Italy. The view from this location to the south extended Rome's power even farther and let folks know there was no way to get beyond Rome's reach.

*When Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea.* Theologian Karl Barth said Pilate enters the Apostles Creed like "a wild dog into a nice room."<sup>1</sup> His cruel presence in this opening act reminds us the gospel

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Myers, *The Apostles' Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism*, p. 62.

His cruel presence in this opening act reminds us the gospel is not an idea, but a fact in human history because now we can date it to Pilate's time in Judea between the years 26 and 39 of the Common Era.

*Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of Ituraea and Trachonitis.* Herod ruled over the place of Jesus' ministry and Philip was just up the road ruling over Northern Palestine. These brothers, conjoined to Roman power, were renowned for being brutal, murdering members of their own family even to keep the throne. We'll see soon enough Herod's willingness to kill children to deal with a threat to his power, and later to behead the opposition John himself to entertain the court.

*Lysanias ruler of Abilene* had Greek family ties, and ruled near the city of Damascus. He traded in women as well as money, offering a neighboring ruler 500 women for something he wanted. He too stood at the heart of political and military power, until he was slain by Marc Anthony at the instigation of Cleopatra.

Finally, Luke announces *the high priests Annas and Caiaphas.* They too come from a ruling class, and under Roman rule were willing to sell out to keep the peace with the oppressor. Here at the beginning of the gospel, Luke is obviously foreshadowing an execution by crucifixion to come, but he's communicating so much more than even that!

Now, I have taken you through the details of this one verse of scripture, not merely to offer a fascinating history lesson, but to drive home Luke's point which is a profoundly theological one. In a time of heavy handed governance and political fear, in a time of enormously powerful autocracies, in a time of extraordinary violence – God enters in. Luke wants us to know that the contrast of John the Baptizer, out in the wilderness, preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins is not so much about personal salvation. It is about the powers of this world being confronted by, warned, and judged by the Creator of Heaven and Earth.

Because Luke is so specific about John's time and place under the cruel autocratic powers of the world then, we also know they are being called to account now.

In *The Atlantic* this month, Anne Applebaum has an important article entitled, "The Autocrats Are Winning." "If the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the story of global democracy's progress over other ideologies – communism, fascism, nationalism – the 21<sup>st</sup> century is, so far, the reverse. Applebaum investigates the particular stories of brave individual dissidents working for basic democratic freedoms among some of the most repressive regimes today. She notes that these autocrats are growing in alignment with each other, so that things like sanctions from the United States no longer have any power to institute change.

Applebaum writes: "All of us have in our minds a cartoon image of what an autocrat looks like. There is a bad man on top. He controls the police. The police threaten people with violence. There are evil collaborators and maybe some brave dissidents. But in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that cartoon bears little resemblance to reality. Nowadays autocracies are not run by one bad guy, but by sophisticated networks composed of kleptocratic financial structures, security services and professional propagandists... The corrupt, state-controlled companies in one dictatorship do business with corrupt state-controlled companies in another. The police in one country can arm, equip and train police in another. They have no unifying ideology... What really bonds the members of this club is a common desire to preserve and enhance their personal power and wealth... their goal is not a flourishing, prosperous country... but a country where they are in charge."

So, leaders of countries like Russia, Belarus, Myanmar, Iran, Venezuela, China and now Afghanistan, have figured out that mass arrests are becoming less necessary because of social media. She adds: "If you jail, torture and possibly murder a few key people word gets

around and others become apathetic because they believe nothing will change.”<sup>2</sup>

This is the world into which John the Baptizer brings the word of God with power. He announces a divine way to counter the powers of cruel autocrats whose list of human rights violations is almost endless. John’s is the radical announcement of an alternative way to order society. Repentance and forgiveness, according to John, are not limited to a religious sphere of individuals getting right with God. He is pointing to an overhaul of global dimensions precisely because he comes in the time of Tiberius, Pilate and Herod, which is our time of Putin and Lukashenko and the Taliban.

It is our time even in the United States when any public servant is more interested in staying in power than working for the common good. The gospel of Jesus Christ, John is telling us, is addressing a wayward, cruel, oppressive social and historical reality, in real time.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it this way: “The baptism of John is a radical word that shakes heaven and earth; it is an invitation to persons who have lost their freedom, to be restored to the freedom of God; it is a summons to Tiberius and his like that they may also be locked in and awaiting release...

It is a call not only to persons but to human community that we need to quit being who we have been if we would be citizens of the new age. The world is an exiled, unforgiven world. Tiberius and his counterparts have made it so and keep it so.” Brueggemann concludes “this strange wilderness word is that forgiveness might reconstitute the world.”

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Applebaum, The Atlantic, December, 2021.

Did you know that John's name means "Yahweh is gracious"? In the midst of our troubled world where autocrats are gaining a foothold over all kinds of institutions that plan budgets and deploy people, John the Baptizer comes to us, with the surprising announcement that there is an alternative way to order the world around the graciousness of God. His call to repentance challenges us not to grow apathetic and believe nothing will change. But to do everything in our power to confront cruelty and violence and oppression of others because John prepares us to receive Jesus in whom all flesh will see the salvation of God. John came to put the powers of earth on notice that injustice shall come to an end. He calls our attention to the tyrants of this world and challenges us to do our part to choose God's graciousness.

It has been exactly ten years since Vaclav Havel died. You remember him as the voice crying in the wilderness of the communist Czech Republic, who made a huge difference for human freedom. In his book *Disturbing the Peace*, Havel wrote: "Hope is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for an early success, but rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unfavorable and adverse the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper the hope is."

Friends, right now the global situation feels unfavorable and averse to our small efforts. Next week, we will attend to John the Baptizer's very specific instructions of how to practice repentance on a smaller scale, closer to home. But today, he has drawn our attention to the global stage upon which God's hope for the world appears on the horizon. He calls us to remember – that even during the reign of oppressive and connected autocracies, we have agency to vote in our democratic system with God's view of salvation for all flesh, and not just our own self-interest in mind.

In a global economy we have agency to choose our investments with God's graciousness at hand which counters the evils of oppression and abuse. We have purchasing power that can refuse to support labor camps and unnecessary pollution and unjust working conditions. Our repentance, our turning away from the ways of the world, and turning toward the paths of God has to keep in view the salvation of all of humankind.

Professor of Christian Ethics, Mark Douglas, challenges us to remember in this time of uncertainty: As Advent people, we live between God's first and second coming. We must learn from the past without trying to relive it; to hope into the future without trying to determine it; to attend to the present without imagining that this is as good as it gets.

May God lead us in holy ways that we might be companions for others, embracing them in their spaces and bearing witness to God's transforming love.

We are not alone in our journey, because Christ is with us as goad, as guide and as goal.

The One who came – *born to set God's people free* is coming soon.

Amen.